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## Improving the English spelling knowledge of students at ATIs, Sri Lanka: A tool based approach

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**Abstract**

English language is a famous lingua-franca in the current competitive and communicative world; and its knowledge is quite inevitable for a student of Higher National Diploma in English (HND in English) at Advanced Technological Institutes (ATIs), Sri Lanka to cope up with the challenges in the existing technology-incorporated educational system. Researchers accept that a student's English literacy level becomes thicker as his spelling or orthographic knowledge i.e. the correct sequences of letters in the writing system, grows steadily. Further, a student's spelling capacity depends on the level of his intelligence and performances in the language class. In the case of a slow learner, he is a student whose thinking skills have developed significantly slower than the accepted norm for his age. A slow learner will go through the same basic developmental stages as other children, but will do so at a significantly slower rate. Thus, as far as the English language development is concerned, a slow learner's spelling capacity is somewhat low or limited than an average student. But one thing should be kept in mind that slow learners are not freak or not non-learners. Instead, they can academically achieve when a teacher fulfills their model-motto which is "If we cannot learn the way you teach, will you teach us the way we can learn?". Thus, it is the predominant duty of a teacher to promote the spelling development through the appropriate ways of teaching or remedial measures to overcome the spelling problems of slow learners. This paper focuses on the spelling rules in English language and especially introduces a simple but effective student-friendly innovative method, i.e. a computational tool known as *Spelling Ruler*, for boosting the spelling ability of slow learners of HND in English at ATIs in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** lingua-franca, slow learners, orthography, literacy level, model-motto, remedial measures, computational tool

**Introduction**

Students are divided into five groups: gifted children, average students, slow learners, mentally retarded children, and delinquents - based on their intelligence, ability, and performance level in the classroom. As far as a slow learner is concerned, he is a child who is unable to cope with the work normally expected of his age. A Greek dictionary defines that a slow learner is a learner who is doing poorly in school, and having his IQ between 70 and 90 and whose social behavior is less than the age level standards. Slow learning is not a learning disability. It is simply a term used to describe a student with the ability to acquire all necessary academic skills, but at a rate and depth below that of the average student whose IQ level is between 90 and 110. The scholar, Lescano (1995) [6], clearly distinguishes between slow learners and those who are disabled. According to him, a slow learner is a student who does not learn successfully due to general socio-cultural problems, frustrating past language classroom experiences, inadequate use of strategies, or lack of interest. Further, the psychologists, Shaw, Grimes, and Bulman (2005) [11], also state that slow learners are children who are doing poorly in school, yet are not eligible for special education which is provided only for students who have learning disability.

There are incidents and evidences in the history that many slow learners became distinguished, such as scientists, doctors, engineers, professors, writers, and even country-presidents. Thus, a proper guidance, constant practice, encouragement, rote-learning, and repetition-repetition-repetition will make a slow learner gain the level of proficiency to big extreme. In fact, it is a challenging task for teachers to handle the slow learners and make them increase their learning capability, especially the knowledge in spelling capacity.

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**Aim**

This research study aims at developing an innovative teaching and learning tool for imparting the spelling or orthographic knowledge in English to the slow learners in the course of HND in English at ATIs, Sri Lanka.

**Objectives**

1. To make the slow learners in the course of HND in English at ATIs become familiar with the spelling rules in English.
2. To provide the students the ample activities in spelling in order to develop the skills in English effectively.

**Spelling Rules or Patterns**

Good spellers are not born, but made. Thus as stated above, the proper practice, patience, perseverance, motivation, and repetition will make a slow learner be successful in spelling. The English alphabet consists of 26 letters used singly or in combinations to write the approximately 44 sounds in English language. Sometimes, the relationship between the letter and the sound (or 'phoneme') is direct as in the spelling of *cat* /kæt/, *help* /help/, and so on. But very often the relationship is more complex. For example, in the word *teeth* /ti:θ/ the two-letter sequence (digraph) 'ee' corresponds to the single sound /i:/ and 'th' to /θ/; in *plateau* /plætəʊ/ the three-letter sequence (trigraph) 'eau' corresponds to /əʊ/; and in *through* /θru:/ the four-letter sequence (tetragraph) 'ough' corresponds to the phoneme /u:/. Further, one sound may have many spelling variations, as does the sound /ʃ/ in *fish* /fɪʃ/, *station* /steɪʃn/, *special* /speʃl/, *charade* /ʃərə:d/, *pressure* /preʃə/, etc. Like that, a sequence of letters may reflect different sounds. For example, the tetragraph 'ough' corresponds nearly seven different sounds or sound combinations like /əʊ/ in *bough*, /əʊ/ in *dough*, /u:/ in *through*, /ɒf/ in *cough*, /ʌf/ in *enough*, /ʌp/ in *hiccough*, and /ɒk/ in *lough*. Today some spelling patterns are pure enigmas for students. Thus, learning spelling rules is inevitable for students in the course of HND in English, especially for slow learners to develop their orthographic knowledge. The following are some of the spelling rules that students of HND in English should find helpful in spelling everyday words:

1. 's' is added to regular singular words to get the plural forms. *pen – pens book – books paper – papers*
2. 'es' is added to singular nouns which end in the following letters or combinations of letters. *s – buses ss – bosses sh – dishes ch – beaches x – boxes z – buzzes*  
But when the 'ch' ending is pronounced /k/, then just make the plural by adding 's'. *stomach /stəmæk/ – stomachs /stəmæks/*
3. 'es' is added to some singular nouns which end in 'o'. *potato – potatoes tomato – tomatoes*
4. 'y' is changed into 'i' and 'es' is added to singular nouns which end in a combination of *consonant + 'y'*. But this rule does not apply to singular nouns that end in a *vowel + 'y'*. *family – families boy – boys*
5. Most singular nouns which end in a combination of *vowel plus 'fe'*, end in 'ves' in the plural form. *wife – wives knife – knives life – lives*
6. Some singular nouns which end in 'f', end in 'ves' in the plural form. *leaf – leaves loaf – loaves half – halves*
7. Some other singular nouns which end in 'f', end in 's' in the plural form. *roof – roofs chef – chefs chief – chiefs*
8. In the combination of the letters 'i' and 'e', 'i' comes before 'e', except after 'c'. *belief relief receive deceive*
9. The letter or letter sequences 'f', 'ff', 'gh', and 'ph' can represent the same sound /f/ in the words *fish /fɪʃ/, cliff /klɪf/, laugh /la:f/, and phone /fəʊn/* respectively.
10. The letter or letter sequences 'c', 'ch', 'ck', 'k', 'kh', and 'q' can represent the same sound /k/ in the words *car /kɑ:/, echo /ekəʊ/, luck /lʌk/, key /ki:/, Khan /kɑ:n/, and queen /kwi:n/* respectively.
11. The letter or letter sequences 'm', 'mb', and 'mn' can represent the same sound /m/ in the words *man /mæn/, comb /kəʊm/, and hymn /hɪm/* respectively.
12. The letter or letter sequences 'n', 'kn', and 'gn' can represent the same sound /n/ in the words *nose /nəʊz/, knight /naɪt/, gnat /næt/* respectively.
13. The letter sequences or digraph 'oo' can represent three different sounds as /ʌ/ in *blood*, /ʊ/ in *good*, and /u:/ in *food*.
14. Plural proper nouns are uncommon, but we rarely need to use them. For example:  
The *Smiths* went to the beach this weekend.  
There are two *Chennais*, one for the rich and another for the rest.
15. Nouns which end in 'is' usually come from Latin; the plurals of these words are made by changing the 'is' to 'es'. *crisis – crises neurosis – neuroses*
16. If a verb ends with a silent 'e' (as in *bake /beɪk/*), then it is dropped before 'ed' and 'ing'. *bake – bakedbake – baking*  
But, there are some exceptions to this rule:
  - Verbs ending in 'ee', 'ye', and 'oe' do not drop the final silent 'e' when adding 'ing'. *free – freeing dye – dyeing hoe – hoeing*
  - There are a few verbs that keep the final silent 'e' when adding 'ing'. *singe – singeing*
17. If the verb ends with a *vowel* and 'l', then the 'l' is doubled before 'ed' and 'ing'. *travel – travelled travel – travelling*  
But, this rule is not considered in American spelling.
18. If the verb ends in a single vowel plus a consonant, and the stress falls on the end of the word, then the final consonant is doubled before 'ed' and 'ing'. *refer /rɪ'fɜ:(r)/ – referred refer – referring*
19. If the verb ends with a single vowel plus a consonant, and the stress is not at the end of the word, then the final consonant is not doubled before 'ed' and 'ing'. *target /'tɑ:ɡɪt/ – targeted target – targeting ticket /'tɪk.ɪt/ – ticketed ticket – ticketing*
20. If the verb has only one syllable and ends with a single vowel and a consonant, then the final consonant should be doubled before 'ed' and 'ing'. *step /step/ – stepped step – stepping stop /stɒp/ – stopped stop – stopping*
21. If the verb ends with two vowels and a consonant, then the final consonant should not be doubled. *create /kri'eɪt/ – created create – creating*
22. If the verb ends in 'c', then add a 'k' before 'ed', 'ing', and 'er'. *picnic – picnicked picnic – picnicking picnic – picnicker*
23. If adding a suffix such as *-able, -ion, -ous, -er, -or, -ance, -ent, -ish, and -al* to a word that ends with a consonant, the spelling is often straightforward. *adopt –*

*adoptable predict – prediction mountain – mountainous boy – boyish*

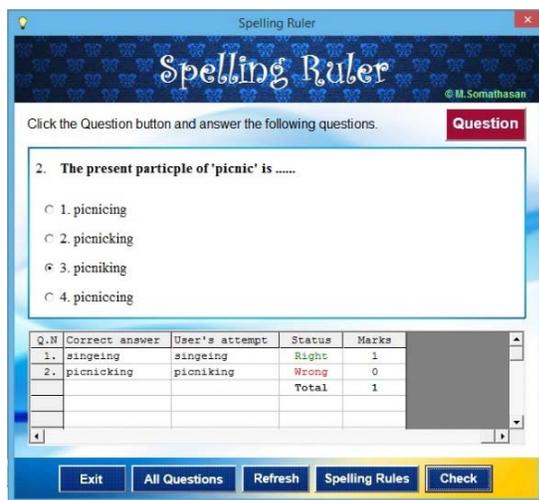
24. The final 'e' is kept when adding the suffixes to the words that end with a soft 'ce' or 'ge' sound. *notice – noticeable courage – courageous*
25. When adding the suffixes *-ous, -ious, -ary, -ation, -ific, -ize, and -ise* to a word which ends in *-our*, then the *-our* is changed into *-or* before adding the said suffixes. *humour – humorous glamour – glamorize labour – laborious*

*Note:* The ending should remain as *-our* before other suffixes. *colour – colourful favour – favourite odour – odourless*

### The Innovative Method for Teaching English Spelling

Now-a-days computers play a big role in English language teaching and learning. It is true that teaching-learning process can be made easy and attractive with the help of the computational linguistic tools. Based on this fact and for this paper, a simple but a competent computational tool, i.e. *Spelling Ruler* (a basic testing method with technology), was developed in order to increase the spelling power of slow learners in HND in English at ATIs.

### The Sample Visual of the Developed Tool



### Methodology

The tool, *Spelling Ruler*, was developed by using the computer language, *Visual Basic 6*. For this tool, the words and sentences for testing were collected from the course books of HND in English and other relevant English textbooks. When a student clicks the *Question* button, one of the questions already fed into the program would appear with four choices for correct answer: for example “*The present participle of 'picnic' is .....*”. The answer-choices for this question were *picnicing, picnicking, picniking, and picniecing*. Then the student had to study the question carefully and click the correct answer from the four choices, i.e. in this case, *picnicking*. After completing all the questions or one by one, the student was able to check his answers, i.e. his strengths and weaknesses, by clicking *Check* button.

### Results and Discussion

The participants of this study were thirty students from the HND in English at ATI, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka. The

students used the tool enthusiastically and the results were quite positive, i.e. nearly 78 percentage of the students (nearly 23) were successful in their first attempt of answering the questions. Further, the students stated that they were very interested in doing this technology-incorporated activity to develop their spelling ability.

Thus, it is not denied that this type of innovative way of learning spelling with the help of the computer technology stimulates the students' interest towards the learning process; and it is also very helpful for teachers to observe the students' performance and motivate them to reach their desired goal in the course.

### Conclusion

Spelling mistake is an unsurmountable barrier to a student's success. Especially, if a slow learner doesn't concentrate on spelling, he will make a lot of language mistakes in writing and speech. Spelling is not only related to writing and speech, but correlates with vocabulary and reading comprehension, as well. Having considered the importance of spelling to raise the IQ level of slow learners, spelling rules or patterns were listed and simply explained in this paper. Further, as the computer technology is a boon for the current trend of education, it makes leaning easier and especially can be fully utilized for the improvement of the orthographic knowledge of slow learners. Based on this concept, a student-friendly innovative computational ELT tool called as *Spelling Ruler*, was developed in order to increase or improve the English spelling of slow learners in the course of HND in English at ATIs, Sri Lanka. Further, the tool was tested among the participants and noted that the objectives of the study were successful to great extent.

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